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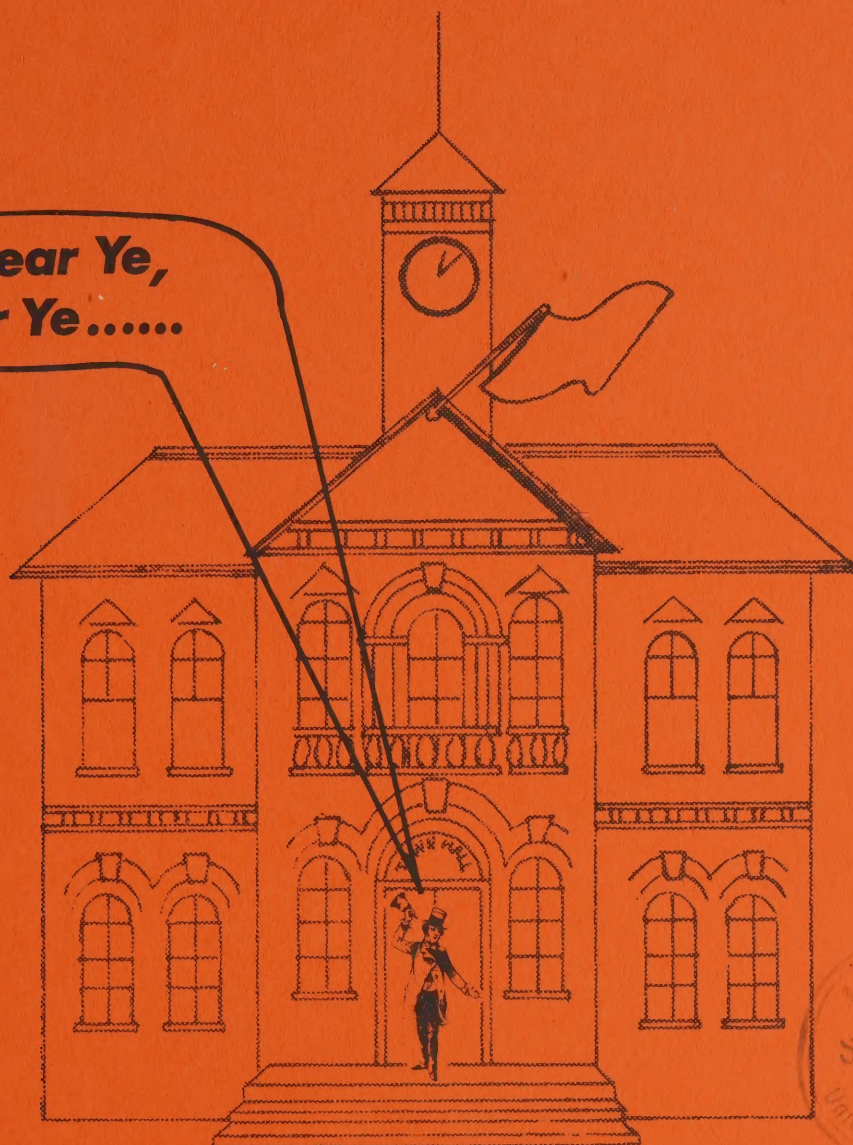
**KEEPING THE
PUBLIC INFORMED**

CA24N

IA 11

- 84B51

**Hear Ye,
Hear Ye.....**



Ontario

Ministry of
Municipal Affairs
and Housing

Claude F. Bennett
Minister

Ward Cornell
Deputy Minister

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KEEPING THE PUBLIC INFORMED



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Municipal Affairs
and Housing

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OVERVIEW

This publication looks at the methods employed by municipalities in their efforts to inform their publics.

It is based on the concept that many of the misunderstandings that occur between residents and their elected and appointed representatives are not based on substance but are rooted in misinformation.

The items dealt with are not structured in any order of priority but cover three areas:

- the formal media (newspapers and television);
- in-house activities at the municipal offices;
- direct out-reach such as public displays, direct mailings and other methods of putting information in the hand of the residents.

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INTRODUCTION

At a time when some municipal councils are debating such basic freedom of information and access mechanisms as open committee meetings, many are going beyond this by implementing various measures to ensure that their publics are accurately informed. It is to these municipalities that this publication is primarily directed, although it is hoped that the ideas may be of interest to others.

Many councils feel it is necessary and ultimately in their best interest to take every opportunity to KEEP THE PUBLIC INFORMED. This philosophy involves council and staff at the municipal offices spending a little extra time and effort exploring every avenue in an attempt to keep the public informed.

This publication highlights some of the activities that have been tried in various municipalities in their attempts to develop the trust and understanding of residents through provision of more and timely information. The list of examples is not all-inclusive but merely tries to illustrate the benefit of keeping the information needs of the public always in the back of our minds. When we do we can identify many opportunities to demonstrate to the public that the municipality is being run in an open manner and their input is actively being sought. The result of this demonstration will be increased trust and understanding, by the public, of the problems being faced by the municipal officials. No single item discussed will meet all the municipality's communications needs. However, the effect of using a variety of the suggestions presented here, together with many of your own ideas, may be an improved ability to keep the public informed.

Most of the following ideas need not be expensive. In fact with a little imagination all of the them can be put into effect with little cost. In some cases local service clubs may want to sponsor the activity by providing space for a public meeting or manpower to distribute notices. What is required is a genuine interest in keeping the public informed. From this perspective council and staff will go about their business with the determination to avail themselves of every opportunity to KEEP THE PUBLIC INFORMED.

NEWSPAPERS

Newspaper advertising is perhaps the most frequently used method of keeping the public informed. Just about every community in Ontario is served by a weekly newspaper and many have a daily newspaper as well.

Advertising by municipalities falls into two categories -- mandatory and optional. Much of the advertising carried out by municipalities is required by statute or regulation. Examples would be the requirement of the Ontario Municipal Board to advertise council's intention to apply to the Board for approval of a zoning bylaw or the many notices required under the Municipal Elections Act. An example of optional advertising might be where council decides to inform the public about some event or activity, such as the opening of a community centre.

Both the mandatory and optional categories of advertising offer opportunities for a municipality to improve its advertising so as to catch the eye of more readers and thereby inform more people.

MANDATORY ADVERTISING

At first one would think there is nothing that can be done to change the notices required by legislation or regulation. It is true the wording and intent of the notice cannot be altered but in many situations the layout can be enhanced. One only has to look at some of the existing notices to see they are not designed to catch the reader's eye: their purpose is merely to ensure the municipality places certain information before the public. How many times have you heard the complaint that a resident missed the notice when it was placed in the newspaper? This often leads to hard feelings when the staff of the municipality points out the advertisement to the resident and confirms it is too late to effect any change or have any input.

Most public notices show little imagination. For reasons of economy these notices are tightly spaced and contain a great deal of technical terminology, as in the case of a Notice of Expropriation which contains a

metes and bounds description of a land parcel, which, while necessary, is next to impossible for the average resident to understand. Such descriptions certainly do not inspire a casual reader of the weekly newspaper to stop and try to figure out if the notice affects his property or is clear over on the other side of the municipality.

What can be done if the words in the notice are prescribed by the legislation or regulation? Quite a bit.

You can improve readability by applying the same techniques that the advertisers of commercial products use. Open the notice up a little by adding what is referred to as white space. Use more blank lines and wider margins. Make use of different type sizes and styles to catch the reader's eye and to highlight important sections such as street names that the reader will recognize. Develop a visually effective logo for the municipality's notices so that they stand out from that of the local shoe store. This will allow an interested resident to scan a page and pick out the municipality's notices.

A picture is worth a thousand words! Why not, if appropriate, include a plan along with those metes and bounds descriptions? The plan probably exists as the metes and bounds description was developed from it.

These techniques are not new and need not represent a large increase in the cost of advertising. The improved acceptance and satisfaction by the residents may more than offset the small increase in cost.

It is not necessary to go to the expense of hiring an advertising agency or consultant to change your notices. Take a look at some of your favourite commercial advertisements in the local paper. What is it about the layout that is different from your notices? Probably just what we have been looking at, namely, better spacing and more interesting use of type sizes and styles.

Lets face it, if you can effectively advertise something like septic tank cleaning you can certainly advertise the installation of a local improvement sewer!

Do not overlook the classified ad staff of the newspaper. They are well equipped to help you develop a better-looking notice. And because you are a large advertiser they may well do it without additional charge.

You may not be limited to visual improvements in your mandatory advertising. It may be possible to increase the understanding of a notice by expanding it to include some form of explanation in less technical terms. You must exercise caution to ensure that the explanation does not mislead or cloud the subject of the notice. It is not suggested that you can eliminate or change the notice prescribed by legislation - merely improve the chance of it achieving its purpose of informing the resident by including ADDITIONAL information. It has been suggested by one municipality that it may be beneficial in certain circumstances to carry out dual advertising - the one required by regulation and another in less technical terms. Before embarking on this course of action you should discuss your intention with your solicitor and if necessary with the appropriate provincial staff.

OPTIONAL ADVERTISING

Here the limits are only the size of the budget and your imagination. In some municipalities press coverage of the local council meeting is sparse or non-existent. This situation may result in inadequately informed residents. In other municipalities councillors may feel that the coverage by the local press is inadequate or slanted toward sensationalism and does not accurately reflect the deliberations of the council or adequately inform the public of all the circumstances surrounding an issue or decision.

A partial solution is for the municipality to use paid advertisements and group all of their notices on a single page under a highly visible banner. This technique has been used successfully in several municipalities.

In some instances there may not be sufficient information to warrant a municipality purchasing, say half a page in the weekly paper. Yet to be effective the resident must become aware that the local council news is

always going to be in a regular advertisement. It may be that the municipality can share the space with the local library or school board or other public agency thereby reducing its cost in those weeks when there are few items. The nature of the business of other public agencies is such that they may be agreeable to allowing council to have priority on space when needed.

Where this has been tried, residents come to rely on this feature for their local government information. It is important to ensure that all municipal advertisements are grouped in a single location in the paper with a clearly visible banner. This allows readers to scan the paper quickly and locate the "council news."

Occasionally newspapers offer space free of charge where the head of council can use his column to highlight the activities of council over the past week. This approach can be effective if its potential pitfalls are recognized. The success of this method will depend on the reader's acceptance. It must not be seen as merely a political tool for the head of council. It should reflect a cross-section of views of the council and deal with some of the controversial items -- not just the sod-turning ceremonies (although this is certainly a part of the information that should be conveyed to the public). If the reader's interest is to be retained it is critical to provide a balanced presentation of views.

PRESS RELEASES

Some municipalities follow the practice of issuing press releases when they want to ensure accurate reporting of some activity of council. The style used in preparing a press release is important. Newspaper editors expect press releases to conform to certain standards otherwise they are likely to be ignored. A newspaper, even a local weekly, receives many press releases and can use only a small percentage of those received. The staff of a municipality may want to discuss with the newspaper editor the style of press release required. Such things as the amount of background information to be included, contact persons, the difference in style between items of local interest and national or regional interest are likely topics for discussion.

TELEVISION

Television is far and away the most effective method of getting information to the largest number of people in the shortest possible time. Also, you do not have to worry about how the information is interpreted by the local reporter because you are seen directly by those with whom you are trying to communicate. However, if the coverage is not live, the way the tape or film is edited can affect the interpretation. The problem is that most regular television stations cover such large areas that local news is of interest to only a small percentage of their vast viewing audience. For this reason most local stories are not covered. Television news editors inevitably have to edit the material so tightly that it is impossible to give the public any kind of detailed background on council issues.

While using regular television to get your message to the public may be impractical for all but the largest municipalities, there is an alternative. Cable television is beginning to cover more and more municipalities, and each cable company is required to provide a separate channel for community broadcasting. The cable companies are generally receptive to working with council to assist them in getting information to their viewers and since their audience is local in nature they are more interested in allotting time for local interest items.

It is not necessary to have the cable company cover the council meetings, although this can provide good coverage. Effective communication is being achieved in many municipalities where members of council and staff have been invited and are encouraged to appear on the local cable channel.

EMPLOYEE AWARENESS PROGRAMS

When residents are interested in obtaining information about a particular matter their first contact with the municipality is usually a member of staff. Often this is not the Clerk or a department head with a broad background and experience with the municipality; it is more likely to be a

receptionist or even an outside worker who happens to be working on the resident's street. At that moment of contact the municipality IS this person.

The manner in which this employee handles this contact will greatly affect the image of the municipality in general and the council and senior staff in particular. How well-informed are these members of your staff?

If the staff member is able to answer the question on the spot the resident will be very happy. Even if the member of staff is able to make an effective referral the resident is usually understanding enough to appreciate the assistance. Employees are not always briefed adequately about the activities of the municipality, beyond their immediate working environment. The result is defensive employees who fumble with the question and appear less than competent. The resident's reaction is all too familiar as he generalizes about the efficiency of his civic administration. This leads to poor staff morale and further tends to force staff to duck questions they feel unable to handle, thereby fostering the idea that there is something to hide. It is a vicious circle.

This problem occurs in all organizations and the solution is the same for all. COMMUNICATE WITH THE STAFF.

For example, if a council finds it necessary to cut back on the number of garbage pickups, the result is usually a lot of grumbling about lack of service without a corresponding reduction in taxes. On the front lines of this reaction are the men and women who operate the garbage trucks. What will their reaction be when faced with a resident who is upset because the garbage has begun to pile up? We must consider that the garbage collector may not be too happy to begin with because the size of the pickups has increased due to the cutback in frequency. Probably this is not the first complaint of the day. At best it will be shrugged off, at worst the garbage collector may agree with the resident's estimation of the local council.

Senior staff were aware that the change was founded on sound economic reasoning that will prevent an increase or may even provide a reduction in

the mill rate. If they had informed the workers of the rationale behind council's decision, these workers would have felt more comfortable when faced with the questions and supported the change. Most workers are proud of their work and, given the correct information, will tend to defend the position of their employer.

Such awareness programs need not be elaborate. Their success depends on the commitment of council and senior staff to keeping the public informed --- in this case through their staffs. After all, the effort seems well worth while when you consider that it may avoid ill feelings and more serious complaints down the road if more and more residents become dissatisfied. Obviously the best time to put out a fire is in the beginning.

How can you achieve this highly desirable goal of keeping your staff informed and thereby enable them to be effective public relations representatives for the municipality?

For larger municipalities where the activities of council are both broad and numerous it may take the form of a regular staff newsletter. In other circumstances it may be handled with a simple note included with the employees' pay cheque -- rather appropriate when you think about it.

Meetings with the employees may be an easy way to handle specific situations; however, there can be a problem of interpretation when you rely upon the spoken word. It seems that when there are twelve people in an audience there will be at least twelve interpretations of what was said and even more depending on the seriousness of the situation.

It is better to give the employee something in writing. Where the council deems necessary it may be advisable to ensure that the employee has a supply of informational brochures that can be handed out to the public. This will avoid confusion and delays while the staff stand around explaining council's actions -- after all, their original purpose is to do their primary job.

Most councils, when they hear a suggestion that a supply of brochures be made available, express concern about the anticipated cost. They visualize a three-colour publication on fine paper. This need not be the case. In fact residents may look upon council's frugality favourably if they receive nothing more elaborate than a simple copy of a typewritten page that is suitably brief, accurate and clearly laid out with the name and telephone number of a person with whom they can discuss the matter further if they wish. It is surprising how many people will not take a complaint further when they see that the staff are making every effort to be open and of assistance.

Some municipalities may want to show their employees that they place even greater importance on the public relations aspect of the employees' duties by implementing a recognition or award program. A pat on the back or a dinner for the employee and spouse may go a long way to improving a council's public relations.

ONE STOP-ONE CALL INFORMATION CENTRE

Many municipalities place a substantially expanded listing in the telephone directory. Each area of functional responsibility such as parks, road maintenance, licensing, and so on, are listed separately with the appropriate telephone number. Other municipalities use one central number to ensure all calls are handled initially at one central point. Then a resident's first contact is with a well-trained person who can either answer the question or properly refer the caller to the person with the information. This idea is far from new and may be a bit easier in theory than in practice but it has been put in place successfully in some municipalities. The idea is to ensure that the resident does not get switched from pillar to post in his quest for information.

If the municipality is large enough to have a switchboard, the operators should be given additional training so that they can politely question the caller to ensure that he is connected with the appropriate person. In this case each department of the municipality is responsible for preparing a

briefing manual describing its area of responsibility in language devoid of jargon so that the operator can quickly reference an activity and find the name of the individual responsible. In addition, the department provides an on-site briefing for the operator to reinforce the material contained in the manual.

A logical extension of this procedure is the requirement that a caller not be transferred if connected to an inappropriate person. Instead the person receiving the call takes as much information as possible and tells the caller that he will have the person who handles the subject matter call the resident back within a specified time. This system is based on the premise that the staff of the municipality are better able to locate the person able to handle the inquiry than the resident. It is also more appropriate. This method of handling calls can be implemented in any size municipality.

24-HOUR INFORMATION LINE

As municipalities grow, there is an increase in the demands for information at hours that the resident finds more convenient. This usually means after office hours. One relatively simple answer to this is provided where the municipality has at least one person working or on call after normal office hours. In many circumstances this is the works yard staff.

All that is involved is the preparation of an indexed reference manual with information supplied by the various departments. Such information might include recreation facility hours of operation and fees, schedules of various meetings, phone numbers of members of council, a map showing ward boundaries where applicable, as well as the home phone numbers of senior staff. This latter item will likely ensure that the information provided by each department is accurate and up to date in order to avoid after-hours calls to the department heads' homes. Additional training should be provided for any person required to answer the phones to ensure proper handling.

The increase in the number of employers permitting flex-time working hours may result in extended phone coverage by virtue of the fact that some staff will want to come to work earlier and others will want to work later. This may be sufficient extended coverage for some municipalities.

MINUTES AND AGENDA IN PUBLIC PLACES

Placing copies of the agenda and minutes of the council and committee meetings in public places will go a long way in attracting the attention of the residents. This assumes that the style of agenda used is complete enough to be informative for the public. Some municipalities use agenda that merely list topic headings but do not give any real detail as to the nature of the business to be dealt with. (For a detailed discussion about the contents and style of council and committee agenda and minutes please refer to BULLETIN No. 4 of this series "COUNCIL AGENDA AND MINUTES-COMMITTEE AGENDA AND REPORTS".)

Placing copies of the agenda and minutes in the Clerk's office and other locations in the municipal office is certainly a good practice, however, it may not be seen by very many people. After all, how many residents will make a special effort to come to the municipal office to see what is coming up at the next meeting of council or one of its committees? Here again it is up to the municipal officials to go beyond minimal requirements and place the material in more accessible places if they are going to achieve their goal of KEEPING THE PUBLIC INFORMED. This need not be a difficult task. The trick is to find out where the public congregate in sufficient numbers to warrant putting a copy of the material "under noses," so to speak.

Perhaps the most significant material to place on public view are the council agenda and minutes. In most municipalities the council meets on a Monday. Agenda are usually prepared and delivered to the councillors on the preceding Friday. Where are we likely to find the residents between Friday and Monday? Shopping, at the library, community centre, and locations within the municipality where special events are taking place.

It is a simple and inexpensive exercise to see that a few additional copies of the agenda are prepared and conspicuously posted in these locations. The same holds true for copies of the minutes. This extra effort goes a long way to showing the public that council is truly interested in keeping them informed and looking for their input.

Some councils do not like to give out the agenda in advance for fear that an item may be misunderstood. If the background material is adequate and the agenda complete, this is unlikely. Even so, is it not better to have input prior to council action rather than having to reconsider a matter after the resident hears about it and is left with the impression that council is "trying to pull a fast one"?

TAX AND UTILITY BILLINGS

Many municipalities take advantage of their tax billings to send out information to the public. In many municipalities this is only a twice-yearly effort and, while effective, it does not keep up a steady enough flow of information to inform the public adequately. Several municipalities are turning to the utility billings to carry additional information to the public. It is surprising how much information can be included on a slip of paper the size of a utility bill and included at no additional mailing cost. Include such information as dates and time of council meetings, trash collection reminders, animal control regulations, upcoming civic celebrations, election reminders and even the occasional pat on the back for council having, say, passed their budget earlier in the year and thereby reduced the cost of temporary borrowing.

SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Another way of keeping the public informed is through the younger generation. A municipality can work with the local school board to encourage them in the development of a series of lessons dealing with the operation of the municipality in general and how to cut through the imagined red tape when they want to get information. After all, the

underlying philosophy of this publication and those progressive municipalities that make an extra effort to keep their public informed is that, in the long run, the better informed the public, the more supportive they will be of council's activities. Where better to start than in the schools?

The lessons could culminate in the council hosting selected course participants at City Hall, perhaps even letting the students participate in a mock council meeting. Where this has been tried the council has benefited from the media publicity as well as from the discussions between the students and their parents.

NEIGHBOURHOOD MEETINGS

Most residents have never been to a council meeting or if they have, it was to protest an action by council that they feel adversely affects them. The reason for their action and discontent is often based on a lack of accurate information. Some councils feel that if the resident will not come to the council then it may be in the best interest of the council to go to the resident.

This usually takes the form of council or some committee of council holding a meeting in a local school or recreation centre that is close to the area affected by a specific issue. This makes it a great deal easier for the resident to get to a meeting. The improved attendance experienced at these meetings is more likely due to the fact that the resident attaches more importance to his attendance because council has made the effort to relocate their meeting "just for him."

The result is what counts and experience shows that this kind of action by council is received favourably. Everyone likes to think that the issue affecting them is special. Where council can do so, the holding of local meetings will reinforce this feeling with the result of a more co-operative attitude on the part of the residents. In such an atmosphere of meeting each other halfway an amicable solution is more likely.

Some councils have experienced such favourable results that they regularly hold full council meeting at different locations throughout the municipality. When following this approach, council should ensure compliance with all legislative requirements affecting the holding of such meetings, including sections 53 of the Municipal Act R.S.O. 1980.

Other councils have held well-advertised local meetings in the old "town hall" style where there is no formal agenda and the residents are encouraged to come and ask question on issues of interest. This informal atmosphere goes a long way to removing the feeling that council operates in an ivory tower environment.

Holding an open house is another method of getting to the public with information. To be successful these require a great deal of planning and publicity, otherwise experience shows that the residents will simply not attend. One success formula is to hold the open house in conjunction with some other activity. This could be the annual Mayor's New Year Levee, or perhaps when the municipal building site is being used for some other activity such as the children's bicycle rodeo or at the same time as people are coming to see a display of the new Official Plan.

EXHIBITS

One very effective way of getting council's message across on important matters is through the use of exhibits. For example, suppose council is considering the implementation of a five-year sanitary sewer program and financing it under the Local Improvement Act. This type of program lends itself well to the artistic abilities of the engineering staff of the municipality or the consulting firm. For very little cost they could develop a portable display that could be set up for various meetings or left on display in public buildings or shopping areas.

Giving the public an opportunity to leisurely review the display will result in a better understanding of the project and the problems that council is facing. As well, when it comes to holding a formal public meeting on the

issue more people are likely to attend because they have been better informed and will be able to provide more meaningful input.

Council's effort in informing the resident will also eliminate much of the feeling that council is trying to do something against the public's wishes. It will result in a more co-operative approach to solving differences of opinion.

TOURS OF MUNICIPAL FACILITIES -- A MEDIA EVENT

Many Ontario municipalities provide a tour of the various municipal facilities following the election of a new council. Such things as community centres, parks, libraries, works yards and even the latest waste disposal site are of interest to new councillors, new residents and the media.

With a little planning this provides an opportunity to get a little free publicity from the local media if they are encouraged to attend. By timing the tour to coincide with the local newspaper's deadlines and seeing that there are plenty of picture opportunities you should get a good story.

While this represents a very limited opportunity to inform the public it does show that if you keep this objective always in the back of your mind many otherwise missed opportunities will be seized. Remember that it is not the impact of just one event that will give the public the secure feeling that their elected and appointed officials are trying to provide good open government, it is the result of a constant and continual flow of examples - big and small - that will achieve this end.

FINANCIAL INFORMATION

It is a requirement that each municipality provide specific financial information to the residents annually. In the past this has taken the form of publishing a financial statement in a local newspaper or sending it

directly to each taxpayer. This type of information is vital if the residents are to be in a position to determine whether or not they are getting value for their tax dollars. The problem has been that this information was presented in a form that was understood by only a few people.

Recently municipalities have been providing this information in different formats such as bar graphs and pie charts that are easier to understand. The care that council takes in presenting this information in an understandable manner will directly reflect on how they are perceived by the public. An unclear presentation will leave the resident with the feeling that the cost of the publication was a waste of money, whereas if it is clearly presented the reaction is more likely to be favourable.

Those municipalities interested in pursuing this area of keeping the public informed should contact the local Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing Field Office and ask for the publication "FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE - A Code for Ontario Municipalities." (A list of the field offices is provided on the last page of this publication.)

ANNUAL REPORTS

Another way of getting information to the public that a municipality may want to consider is the issuance of an annual report. It would be necessary to weigh the cost/benefits of producing a report that highlights activities of the past year. Such a report could include a brief outline of the various functions carried out by the different sections of the administration along with the name or number of the appropriate contact.

CONCLUSION

This publication has looked at the experiences of other municipalities that have attempted to deal with the problem of KEEPING THE PUBLIC INFORMED.

As can be seen, many approaches have been tried with varying results. The point of the exercise has been to demonstrate that innovative ideas for informing the public will be developed when council and staff maintain a constant effort to seize every opportunity to better inform their public.

These efforts are met with enthusiastic support by most residents. The council and staff of the municipality that adequately informs its public will benefit substantially in their daily activities and from the knowledge of having done their jobs well.

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